

# Ich ~~habe~~ **bin** nach Berlin gefahren

You don't need two past tenses in German. When Germans talk, they use the **Perfekt** and almost nothing else — and English already hands you the shape for free. The only thing English never says is **Ich bin gegangen**, and that single line is the whole difficulty. Below: the full decision table, the complete **sein** list, every **ge-** rule, and the places where the rule quietly leaks.

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01 00:12

## English already builds this sentence

Look at what you do in English without thinking: *I **have** eaten*. Two parts — a helper verb, then a past participle. You never say *I have eat*, and you never stop to work out why. That structure is already in your head.

German uses exactly the same build. The helper goes in **position 2**, the participle drops to **the very end**. Nothing new so far.

✓ Ich **habe** eine Pizza **gegessen**.

I ate a pizza. — helper in slot 2, participle last.

Then German does the one thing English refuses to do: for some verbs it swaps the helper. Not **haben** but **sein** — literally «I *am* gone».

✓ Ich **bin** nach Berlin **gefahren**.

I went to Berlin. — «I am travelled», in English terms.

✗ Ich ~~habe~~ nach Berlin **gefahren**.

Wrong. Your English reflex reached for «have» — and German heard it.

① So there is really only one question on this page: **haben or sein?** Everything else you already own.

One more piece of relief before the tables. German has a second past tense (**Präteritum**: **ich ging**, **ich machte**), but in spoken German it has mostly retreated into books and news reports. If your goal is *talking*, the Perfekt is the past tense you build. One tense, not two.

The decision table — the part you save

Read this table in one direction only: **infinitive** → **participle** → **helper**. The helper column is the one that decides your sentence.

| INFINITIV   | PARTIZIP II   | HELPER       | MEANING                                         | EXAMPLE                                     |
|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| machen      | gemacht       | haben        | to do , to make                                 | Ich habe die Hausaufgaben gemacht .         |
| kaufen      | gekauft       | haben        | to buy                                          | Ich habe ein Auto gekauft .                 |
| arbeiten    | gearbeitet    | haben        | to work ( <i>extra -e-</i> )                    | Ich habe drei Stunden gearbeitet .          |
| trinken     | getrunken     | haben        | to drink                                        | Wir haben Kaffee getrunken .                |
| essen       | gegessen      | haben        | to eat                                          | Ich habe eine Pizza gegessen .              |
| sehen       | gesehen       | haben        | to see                                          | Ich habe den Film gesehen .                 |
| lesen       | gelesen       | haben        | to read                                         | Er hat das Buch gelesen .                   |
| schreiben   | geschrieben   | haben        | to write                                        | Ich habe eine E-Mail geschrieben .          |
| sprechen    | gesprochen    | haben        | to speak                                        | Ich habe mit ihm gesprochen .               |
| nehmen      | genommen      | haben        | to take                                         | Ich habe den Bus genommen .                 |
| schlafen    | geschlafen    | haben        | to sleep ( <i>a state , not a change</i> )      | Ich habe gut geschlafen .                   |
| helfen      | geholten      | haben        | to help                                         | Er hat mir geholfen .                       |
| studieren   | studiert      | haben        | to study ( <i>no ge-</i> )                      | Ich habe in Wien studiert .                 |
| besuchen    | besucht       | haben        | to visit ( <i>no ge-</i> )                      | Ich habe meine Oma besucht .                |
| einkaufen   | eingekauft    | haben        | to shop ( <i>ge- inside</i> )                   | Ich habe im Supermarkt eingekauft .         |
| anrufen     | angerufen     | haben        | to call ( <i>ge- inside</i> )                   | Ich habe dich gestern angerufen .           |
| gehen       | gegangen      | sein         | to go — movement                                | Ich bin nach Hause gegangen .               |
| kommen      | gekommen      | sein         | to come — movement                              | Sie ist zu spät gekommen .                  |
| fahren      | gefahren      | sein / haben | to travel / to drive sth . — <i>see Trap 01</i> | Ich bin nach Berlin gefahren .              |
| fliegen     | geflogen      | sein / haben | to fly — same split as fahren                   | Wir sind nach Rom geflogen .                |
| laufen      | gelaufen      | sein         | to run , to walk — movement                     | Er ist zehn Kilometer gelaufen .            |
| aufstehen   | aufgestanden  | sein         | to get up — movement                            | Ich bin früh aufgestanden .                 |
| einschlafen | eingeschlafen | sein         | to fall asleep — change of state                | Das Kind ist sofort eingeschlafen .         |
| passieren   | passiert      | sein         | to happen — change of state                     | Was ist passiert?                           |
| sterben     | gestorben     | sein         | to die — change of state                        | Mein Großvater ist letztes Jahr gestorben . |
|             |               |              |                                                 |                                             |

| INFINITIV | PARTIZIP II | HELPER | MEANING                       | EXAMPLE                             |
|-----------|-------------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| werden    | geworden    | sein   | to become — pure memorisation | Sie ist Ärztin geworden .           |
| bleiben   | geblieben   | sein   | to stay — pure memorisation   | Wir sind zu Hause geblieben .       |
| sein      | gewesen     | sein   | to be — pure memorisation     | Ich bin noch nie in Japan gewesen . |

Notice what the **haben** half of the table looks like: eating, buying, reading, calling, working. Ordinary verbs. That is the whole point — **haben is the default**, and the exceptions are listed in the next section in full.

The statistical shortcut, said plainly: the overwhelming majority of German verbs take **haben**. If you are mid-sentence and genuinely have no idea, saying **habe** is not a coin flip — it is standing on the right side of the odds.

03 01:45

### You only memorise one side — and it is the short one

Here is the relief nobody puts on slide one. You are not memorising which verbs take **haben** — that list is endless. You memorise the **sein** list, and then **every verb not on it takes haben automatically**.

Three families fill the list: **movement from A to B**, **change of state**, and **three outliers** that obey nothing.

| VERB        | PARTIZIP II   | WHY SEIN                      | EXAMPLE                                   |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| gehen       | gegangen      | movement                      | Ich bin ins Kino gegangen .               |
| kommen      | gekommen      | movement                      | Er ist gestern gekommen .                 |
| fahren      | gefahren      | movement ( <i>no object</i> ) | Wir sind nach Hamburg gefahren .          |
| fliegen     | geflogen      | movement ( <i>no object</i> ) | Ich bin nach Rom geflogen .               |
| laufen      | gelaufen      | movement                      | Sie ist zum Bahnhof gelaufen .            |
| rennen      | gerannt       | movement                      | Ich bin zum Bus gerannt .                 |
| reisen      | gereist       | movement                      | Ich bin durch Europa gereist .            |
| steigen     | gestiegen     | movement                      | Er ist auf den Berg gestiegen .           |
| fallen      | gefallen      | movement                      | Das Glas ist auf den Boden gefallen .     |
| ankommen    | angekommen    | movement                      | Der Zug ist pünktlich angekommen .        |
| aufstehen   | aufgestanden  | movement                      | Ich bin um sechs aufgestanden .           |
| einschlafen | eingeschlafen | change of state               | Ich bin vor dem Fernseher eingeschlafen . |
| aufwachen   | aufgewacht    | change of state               | Ich bin früh aufgewacht .                 |
| wachsen     | gewachsen     | change of state               | Das Kind ist schnell gewachsen .          |
| sterben     | gestorben     | change of state               | Er ist im Winter gestorben .              |
| passieren   | passiert      | change of state               | Was ist gestern passiert?                 |
| werden      | geworden      | outlier — memorise            | Sie ist Lehrerin geworden .               |
| bleiben     | geblieben     | outlier — memorise            | Wir sind zu Hause geblieben .             |
| sein        | gewesen       | outlier — memorise            | Ich bin noch nie in Japan gewesen .       |

That is the list you carry. Roughly twenty verbs — and the ten at the top are verbs you say every single day anyway.

- ① Honest footnote: this is the working list, not the complete inventory. A few more genuinely take **sein** and you will meet them later — **begegnen** (Ich bin ihm begegnet.), **folgen** (Ich bin ihm gefolgt.), **gelingen** (Es ist mir gelungen.). Nobody at A2 will hold those against you.

## ADVERTISEMENT

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## Where does ge- go?

The helper is half the sentence. The other half is the participle — and there are exactly four things that can happen to **ge-**. Learn the four and you can build a participle for a verb you have never seen.

| VERB TYPE                        | WHAT HAPPENS TO GE-                               | PATTERN                   | EXAMPLES                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regular (weak)                   | ge- in front, -t at the end                       | ge + stem + t             | machen → gemacht · kaufen → gekauft · sagen → gesagt                                              |
| Irregular (strong)               | ge- in front, -en at the end, vowel often changes | ge + stem + en            | trinken → getrunken · sprechen → gesprochen · schreiben → geschrieben                             |
| Stem ends in -t / -d / -fn / -gn | an extra -e- is pushed in so you can pronounce it | ge + stem + et            | arbeiten → gearbeitet · warten → gewartet · öffnen → geöffnet · regnen → geregnet                 |
| Verbs in -ieren                  | no ge- at all                                     | stem + t                  | studieren → studiert · telefonieren → telefoniert · reparieren → repariert · passieren → passiert |
| Inseparable prefix               | no ge- at all — the prefix already sits there     | prefix + stem + t/en      | besuchen → besucht · verstehen → verstanden · erklären → erklärt · entscheiden → entschieden      |
| Separable prefix                 | ge- moves <b>inside</b> , between prefix and verb | prefix + ge + stem + t/en | anrufen → angerufen · einkaufen → eingekauft · mitbringen → mitgebracht · fernsehen → ferngesehen |

The inseparable prefixes worth knowing by heart: **be-** · **ge-** · **er-** · **ver-** · **zer-** · **ent-** · **emp-** · **miss-**. None of them ever lets a **ge-** in front.

How do you tell a separable prefix from an inseparable one without a dictionary? **Say the infinitive out loud.** If the stress lands on the prefix (**AN**rufen · **EIN**kaufen · **AUF**stehen) it separates and **ge-** goes inside. If the stress lands on the verb (**be**SUchen · **ver**STEhen · **er**KLÄren) there is no **ge-**.

And there is a third group nobody bothers to name for you: the **mixed verbs**. They take the strong vowel change *and* the weak **-t** ending at the same time. There are only a handful, and you use all of them constantly.

| INFINITIV | PARTIZIP II | HELPER | EXAMPLE                        |
|-----------|-------------|--------|--------------------------------|
| bringen   | gebracht    | haben  | Ich habe dir Blumen gebracht . |
| denken    | gedacht     | haben  | Ich habe an dich gedacht .     |
| kennen    | gekannt     | haben  | Ich habe ihn gut gekannt .     |
| nennen    | genannt     | haben  | Er hat keinen Namen genannt .  |
| wissen    | gewusst     | haben  | Ich habe es nicht gewusst .    |
| rennen    | gerannt     | sein   | Ich bin schnell gerannt .      |



## WATCH OUT

### Two participles that look like they forgot to change

- ✓ Ich habe meinen Schlüssel **vergessen**.

I forgot my key. — vergessen → vergessen, identical to the infinitive.

- ✓ Ich habe ein Geschenk **bekommen**.

I got a present. — bekommen → bekommen, also identical.

They are not mistakes and they are not missing a **ge-**. Both are strong verbs with an inseparable prefix, so the rule says «no ge-, keep the -en ending» — and the result happens to look exactly like the infinitive.

## Three traps that break real sentences



### TRAP 01

#### Same verb, two helpers — the object decides

- ✓ Ich **bin** nach Berlin gefahren.

I went to Berlin. — no object, you were simply travelling → sein

- ✓ Ich **habe** das Auto gefahren.

I drove the car. — there is an object, you operated something → haben

The verb did not change; the sentence around it did. Ask yourself one thing: **did I move, or did I move something?** Moved → **sein**. Moved something → **haben**.

- ✓ Ich **habe** meinen Bruder nach Hause gefahren.

I drove my brother home. — «my brother» is the object → haben

- ✓ Der Pilot **hat** das Flugzeug geflogen.

The pilot flew the plane. — same split with fliegen.

The same double life shows up with **fliegen** • **segeln** • **reiten** • **schwimmen** • **tanzen**. Journey from A to B → **sein**. Activity with an object, or just the activity itself → **haben**: **Wir haben die ganze Nacht getanzt.** versus **Wir sind durch den Saal getanzt.**



## TRAP 02

### No movement anywhere — and still sein

- ✓ Ich **bin** zu Hause geblieben.

I stayed home. — staying is the opposite of movement, and it still takes sein.

- ✓ Es **ist** kalt geworden.

It got cold.

- ✓ Ich **bin** noch nie in Japan gewesen.

I have never been to Japan.

This is the point where the «movement rule» you were taught stops covering the ground. **sein** • **bleiben** • **werden** sit outside it entirely. There is no logic to reconstruct here — three verbs, pure memorisation, and then you are done.

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- ① Related and easy to mix up: **einschlafen** (to fall asleep) is a change of state → Ich **bin** **eingeschlafen**. But **schlafen** (to sleep) is just a state → Ich **habe** gut **geschlafen**. Same root, different helper.



## TRAP 03

### The participle is not allowed to sit next to its helper

✗ Ich habe ~~gegessen~~ eine Pizza.

Wrong. English word order transplanted straight into German.

✓ Ich habe gestern eine Pizza **gegessen**.

I ate a pizza yesterday. — everything else squeezes in between.

The helper claims **position 2** and the participle claims **the last position**. Everything else in the sentence — time, place, objects — gets packed in the middle. Germans call the two ends a **Satzklammer**, a sentence bracket: the sentence is held shut at both ends.

| SENTENCE TYPE                        | WHERE THE HELPER SITS                              | WHERE THE PARTICIPLE SITS | EXAMPLE                                      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Normal statement                     | position 2                                         | very end                  | Ich habe<br>gestern Pizza<br>gegessen .      |
| Starting with the time               | still position 2 — the<br>subject slides behind it | very end                  | Gestern habe<br>ich Pizza<br>gegessen .      |
| Yes/no question                      | position 1                                         | very end                  | Hast du das<br>Buch gelesen?                 |
| W-question                           | position 2                                         | very end                  | Wann bist du<br>angekommen?                  |
| Subordinate clause (weil , dass ...) | very end — after the<br>participle                 | second to last            | ... , weil ich zu<br>viel gegessen<br>habe . |

The last row is the one that surprises people: in a **weil**-clause the two parts swap places. Participle first, helper last.

This is also why nobody interrupts you mid-sentence to correct you. A German ear **waits for the end** — the verb information does not arrive until you finish. Say the participle, or the sentence never lands.

06 04:45

## Nobody told you: English used to do this too

«I am gone» feels impossible in English. It was not always. For most of the history of English, verbs of **motion and change** took *be*, exactly like German takes **sein** — and the sentences are still sitting in the language where you can read them.

- *Christ **is** risen.* — not «has risen»

- *The time **is** come.*
- *Winter **is** come.*
- *He **is** gone.* — the one that survived into everyday speech
- *I'**m** finished.* · *She'**s** grown.* — the pattern still leaking through today

Over the nineteenth century English quietly let *have* take over everything, and the *be*-perfect faded into a handful of frozen phrases. German never made that switch. Neither did French (*je **suis** allé*), Italian (*sono andato*) or Dutch (*ik **ben** gegaan*).

So **Ich bin gegangen** is not a strange German invention you have to tolerate. It is the older European pattern — **English is the odd one out**, and you are the one who has to re-learn something your own language dropped. That reframe is worth more than any mnemonic: you are not fighting German logic, you are restoring a switch English turned off.

- ① It also tells you *which* verbs to expect on the list. The English survivors are all motion and change — come, go, rise, grow, finish. That is precisely the German **sein** list.

07 05:30

## Where the rule leaks — and how to write it down

Four places this page is not the whole truth. You should hear them from a page, not from a German looking confused at you.

- **haben, sein and the modal verbs normally stay in the Präteritum.** **Ich bin gewesen** is correct, but people say **Ich war**. Same for **Ich hatte**, **Ich musste**, **Ich wollte**. Build the Perfekt for everything else; leave these four in the simple past.
- **Regional split.** **sitzen** · **stehen** · **liegen** take **haben** in the north (**Ich habe gesessen.**) and **sein** in the south, Austria and Switzerland (**Ich bin gesessen.**). Both are correct where they are spoken. Nothing to fix.
- **fahren, fliegen, schwimmen, tanzen and friends work both ways.** The helper depends on the sentence, not on the verb. There is no list that can save you here — only Trap 01.
- **The «90% haben» figure is a rule of thumb, not a measurement.** It is true enough to bet a sentence on and not true enough to quote as a fact.

Now the practical part. This topic is not solved by studying it — it is solved by **changing how you write verbs down**. If your notebook says **gehen** = to go, you will do the arithmetic again every single time you open your mouth.

- ❌ **gehen** = to go
- ✅ **gehen — ist gegangen** = to go — **Ich bin ins Kino gegangen.**
- ❌ **anrufen** = to call
- ✅ **anrufen — hat angerufen** = to call — **Ich habe dich gestern angerufen.**

Three boxes, always: **infinitive + helper + participle**, then **one sentence from your own life**. Write **ist** or **hat** in front of the participle every time — that tiny word is the entire decision, stored where you will see it.

- ① Do the **sein** list first. About twenty verbs, one evening. After that every new verb you meet is **haben** until proven otherwise — and you will almost never have to prove otherwise.

08 BUILD

## Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

## TIPS

### Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

**The frame: helper + ... + participle**

Ich habe gestern eine Pizza gegessen. Helper in slot 2, participle parked at the end.

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Ich habe ... gegessen.

02

**Regular ge...t, strong ge...en**

gemacht • gekauft vs gegessen • gefahren. Strong participles are learned with the verb.

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machen → gemacht • essen → gegessen

03

**sein for motion and change**

gehen • fahren • aufstehen • bleiben • werden take sein. Anything with a direct object takes haben — even Ich habe das Auto gefahren.

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Ich bin gegangen. • Ich habe gegessen.

04

**Prefixes control ge-**

Separable: ge- goes inside — anrufen. Inseparable (ver-/be-/er-): no ge- — verstanden. -ieren: no ge- — studiert.

angerufen · verstanden  
· studiert

✗ ~~Ich habe ins Kino gegangen.~~

✓ Ich bin ins Kino gegangen.

\_\_\_\_\_

Motion takes sein.

✗ ~~geverstanden~~

✓ verstanden

\_\_\_\_\_

Inseparable prefixes block ge-.

✗ ~~gestudiert~~

✓ studiert

\_\_\_\_\_

-ieren verbs never take ge-.

✗ ~~Ich habe gegessen gestern  
eine Pizza.~~

✓ Ich habe gestern eine  
Pizza gegessen.

\_\_\_\_\_

The participle owns the final slot.

08 06 : 20

## Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

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